

The Challenge of the Ecumenical Movement to Methodism

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William Temple, in his enthronement sermon at Canterbury Cathedral in 1942, used the phrase "the great new fact of our era" to describe the Christian world-fellowship which we call the ecumenical movement. Today, as we survey what has happened in the ecumenical movement during the past eighteen years, especially with the emergence of the World Council of Churches, we affirm with new certainty and clarity: it is great, it is new, and it is a fact.

The initial novelty of the movement, however, has worn off. As Professor Albert C. Outler has described it, "the ecumenical honeymoon is over." The early years of comparative analysis are past and we are now in a new stage of development. The period of confession is over; we are now to be reconciled. To *be* together is no longer enough; we must *move* forward. The Faith and Order Commission experienced this turning point at the Lund Conference in 1952. The Lund Report states, "There are truths about the nature of God and His Church which will remain forever closed to us unless we *act* together." Two years later the Evanston Assembly put it this way, "To stay together is not enough. We must *go* forward."

The question for us then stands: what does this mean for Methodism? Are we progressing with the rest of the ecumenical movement in this new development? Many would like to answer this in the affirmative, pointing out that Methodism has its very strength in action and that we therefore have an important role to play in this new stage of ecumenical life. Certainly it is true that Methodism is an acting church. The challenge of the ecumenical movement today, however, demands that it be also a thinking church.

One of the abilities and tendencies which we have inherited from our tradition is that of acting to meet practical needs and then of finding theological reasons, if possible, later. This has, indeed, been the vital ethos of Methodism: experience and action. The time has come, however, when Methodism must

do more serious thinking as a church if it is going to meet the challenge of the ecumenical movement. If our witness for action in the life of the church is going to contribute significantly to the rising stream of ecumenical churchmanship, then we must be able to show that Methodism is not only moving but that it knows whither and why.

The task which confronts Methodism today before it can "go" anywhere in the ecumenical movement is to come to some understanding, in a more specific way, of what we as a church see as being our basic position in such areas as doctrine, authority, and polity. We ourselves need a clearer understanding of what we believe, what we are, and what we do. It is no longer adequate merely to say that our position is contained in "The Articles of Religion," *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, his *Notes on the New Testament*, the hymns of Charles Wesley, and the *Discipline*. This does not *necessarily* mean that our traditional position as found in these sources is no longer adequate, but it does mean that this position needs at least to be clarified for purposes of better understanding and communication.

Let us now examine the three areas mentioned above where Methodism is being challenged by the ecumenical movement.

I. DOCTRINE

A criticism of Methodism that one commonly hears in ecumenical circles is, "You Methodists don't have any theology!" What is really meant is that the theology of Methodists is so unpredictable that it appears as though a theology of Methodism does not exist. We can well sympathize with those who have this impression.

The emphasis of Wesley was not on theology and Methodism was not a theological schism. Therefore neither Wesley nor Methodism found it necessary to define the theological position systematically. However, to think that neither Wesley nor Methodism has a theology is to misinterpret the facts. One needs only to read through a few of *Wesley's Standard Sermons* to discover the deep current of theological conviction which motivated his ministry. The same remains true of Methodism to this very day as revealed in "the cumulative character of our Discipline."

Wesley had no doubt concerning the *fact* of the Trinity, original sin, the inspiration of Scripture, the Incarnation, and the

Atonement. He did have many doubts, however, concerning specific *theories* about these doctrines and did not consider right opinions about them as either essential for salvation or of the essence of Methodism. "What Wesley did," writes Dean Robert E. Cushman, "was not to define the truth about Christ but to persuade, and plead, and urge men to surrender to Him."¹

E. H. Sugden has shown that when Wesley spoke of "our doctrines" he did not mean the whole round of Christian orthodoxy, but he did mean specifically the doctrines of "justification by faith, entire sanctification, the atonement of our Lord, assurance of pardon by the witness of the Spirit, the impossibility of a sincere seeker after the Truth being lost, and free grace as opposed to predestinarianism."²

Wesley held that "our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are repentance, faith, and holiness." Here is the genius of our theological heritage from Wesley: that he insisted upon the great central affirmations of the Christian faith and not particular theories about them. It is the fact of our experience that is essential and not our explanation of the fact.

This unique combination of loyalty to the Apostolic Faith, the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation, together with an intellectual freedom to understand this faith in terms of modern experience, has given Methodism the ability to speak to all men, in all times, and in all places. It was precisely this deposit in the heritage of Methodism that enabled it to rise out of the nineteenth century controversies surrounding the names of Darwin, Spencer, Strauss, and the Tübingen school of biblical criticism. Again in the early part of the twentieth century it served Methodism well during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.

The fact remains, however, that even after having stated this traditional doctrinal position of the Methodist Church, we must then say that this alone is inadequate for present day ecumenical conversations. There are many areas, such as the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of the Ministry, where we claim to share the "common faith," but have never

¹Robert E. Cushman, "Jesus as Lord," *Drew Gateway*, XXVIII (Winter, 1958), p. 94.

²Edward H. Sugden (ed.), *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley* (2 vols.; 4th ed.; London: Epworth Press, 1955), I, p. 19.

made a statement as to what we understand that faith to mean.³ The ecumenical movement wants to know what it is we believe God has given Methodism to say to the Church.

Wesley's advice to "think and let think" rings in our ears. We respond with generous tolerance toward the convictions of others, but too often forget to do the homework of our own thinking. Kenneth Grayston, writing in the *Ecumenical Review*, has described the Methodist situation in this regard quite rightly when he says, "We are living on concealed theological assumptions--concealed often from ourselves."⁴ Perhaps we need a theological definition of our freedom!

In facing the full sweep of the doctrinal challenge of the ecumenical movement we should be aware of two dangers.

1. The danger of Methodism having nothing to say theologically; as though our heritage had no theological substance. To respond in this fashion would be to betray our heritage.

2. The danger of so formalizing the Methodist position on doctrinal issues that we become another confessional church (in the Reformation sense). This would also betray our heritage.

The pathway between these pitfalls is precarious, and yet it is the path by which Methodism, being faithful to its heritage, can give positive and dynamic leadership in the area of doctrine to the ecumenical movement.

II. AUTHORITY

"By what authority are you doing these things?" (Mark 11:28). This is a question that the churches today are repeatedly asking each other in an attempt to reach a common understanding of the Christian authority for doctrine, liturgics, and polity.

There is hardly any question but that John Wesley looked to the Bible for his authority. He said, "I am a man of one Book"; he described Methodism as "Scriptural Christianity"; he defined the aim of Methodism as being "to spread Scriptural Holiness"; and he called Methodists "Bible Christians."

In practice, however, personal experience played a most important role in his theology. Taking a strictly empirical view of Wesley, it has even been suggested that he founded

³There have been, of course, important contributions on these subjects from individual Methodists and in statements from the British Methodist Church.

⁴*Ecumenical Review*, IX (January, 1957), p. 182.

religion and theology in the fact of experience.⁵ But Harald Lindström, in his recent study of *Wesley and Sanctification*, rectifies this one-sided exposition when he says that "Scripture was the obvious foundation to which Wesley always referred, but it was interpreted in the light of experience."⁶ There is good basis for this assessment when we read Wesley's own statement in the preface to his *Standard Sermons*, "I have endeavored to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not."

But this is not the whole picture of Wesley's concept of authority, even though it is the most apparent. The late Dr. Umphrey Lee pointed out how in Wesley, inward, personal religious experience is subject to the regulative control of the Bible, particularly as interpreted by the primitive Fathers and reason.⁷ Wesley's education and background in the Church of England gave him a deep appreciation and understanding of the place which Christian tradition has in the authority of the faith.

As Methodism spread to the American frontier, the authority of Scripture and experience was increasingly emphasized by the circuit-riding clergy. The influence of the broader concept of authority such as Wesley held, especially with regard to Christian tradition as interpreted by the Early Church Fathers, lost its place in the perspective due to the social and cultural situation which faced the frontier church.

In its place, through the past 180 years, has grown up a "Methodist tradition" which colors everything we do and believe. Some of the factors which have contributed to this tradition of Methodism in America as it has developed from colonial times to the present day are:⁸ the pioneers' independent individualism; the colonial spirit of political and religious radicalism; the limited opportunity for formal theological education of ministers during the first half-century of Methodism in America; the development and success of the technique

⁵H. Bett, *The Spirit of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1937), p. 131.

⁶Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (London: Epworth Press, 1950), p. 5.

⁷Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1936), p. 143.

⁸See William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religions in America* (New York: Harper, 1930), pp. 1-10.

of revivalism to win people to the church; the issues of slavery and segregation; periods of sectionalism, nationalism, and internationalism running parallel in the political and religious history of America; and the deep impact of liberalism on American Methodist theology. The net result is that today, in large segments of American Methodism, the tradition prevails that every man not only has equal right to his own opinion, but that every man's opinion is equally right.

This recognition of a "Methodist tradition" places us right in the center of "Tradition and Traditions as an Ecumenical Problem."⁹ To deal with this problem, the Lund Conference on Faith and Order adopted the following recommendation of the report of Section II on Continuity and Unity:

We propose the establishment of a Theological Commission to explore more deeply the resources for further ecumenical discussion to be found in that common history which we have as Christians and which we have discovered to be longer, larger, and richer than any of our separate histories in our divided churches. Such a study would focus not only on the hard cores of disagreement between us but also on the positive discoveries there to be made of the various levels of unity which underly our diversities and dividedness.¹⁰

On the basis of this proposal the "Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions" was formed as a beginning toward the recognized need for:

a new and truly ecumenical study of the total historical experience of the Christian community; and this as a theological enterprise which would provide new and solvent insights into the nature of the church and the meaning of the Gospel.¹¹

Another angle from which this same problem is being approached can be seen from a recent consultation of twenty-one church historians at the Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland, where they considered the theme "Factors in the writing and teaching

⁹See the article by this title from J. Robert Nelson in *Theology Today*, XIII (July, 1956), pp. 151-165.

¹⁰*Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order*, ed., Oliver S. Tomkins (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 27.

¹¹Albert C. Outler, "A Way Forward from Lund," *Ecumenical Review*, V (October, 1952), p. 60.

of Church History which tend to perpetuate prejudices and denominational bias."

These two examples show the widespread recognition of the fact that "the traditional patterns of church history and the history of doctrine have been more apologetic and partisan than synoptic and ecumenical."¹²

This is all concerned with that area of *authority* which is of paramount importance for the consideration of Methodism today, namely, Tradition and our tradition. Professor Outler sounds the keynote for us when he says

Our oneness in Christ, which we all confess, implies, among other things, that we have a common history that overarches, and includes our separate histories. Indeed, our separate histories are authentic only to the degree to which they reflect or derive from this common history.¹³

Can we not, in fact, say that Tradition belongs to the essence of the Church? The revelation of God came in an historical person, at an historical moment, under historical circumstances. The account of this is put into a New Testament Canon which is itself tradition. There is only one tradition, Jesus Christ; but there are many witnesses to or *traditions* about this *Tradition*. In fact, we can only come to the Christian Tradition through one or another of our various traditions, and this is the problem; that we must distinguish between the *T* and the *t's*. We are faced with the dialectic of singularity and plurality.

This would suggest a number of questions for Methodism to take into consideration in dealing with this problem:¹⁴

1. What common *traditio* does Methodism share with all existing communities which call and profess themselves Christian.
2. What is there in the Methodist tradition that is an 'addition to,' 'deviation from,' or 'enrichment of'

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁴These questions were first formulated by Prof. Georges Florovsky in a *memorandum* to the Enquiry Group on Tradition and Traditions of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order. They were then reported by Albert C. Outler, Chairman, in an Interim Report. See the Bulletin from the WCC Division of Studies; Geneva (October, 1955), pp. 13, 14.

the primitive or initial *traditio*?

3. Does this in any way alter the character and meaning of that 'faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3)?

4. If it does not alter the character and meaning of the faith, is it still essential for the understanding of the 'fullness of the faith'?

5. How far can we recognize the essential complex of *kerygma* and *paradosis* in other Christian communities than our own?

6. When and why does diversity become divisive?

This call to study anew the important role of Tradition, which belongs to the *esse* of the Church, or as the Edinburgh Report of 1937 put it, "the living stream of the Church's life," is not a call to traditionalism. Indeed, we must guard against what Dean J. Robert Nelson has called

the easy acquiescence to patterns of belief and practice which were fashioned with effort and imagination by our fathers under particular historical circumstances, and then frozen for future generations to appropriate in a manner not only anachronistic but injurious to the work of the Church in the present world.¹⁵

The Lund Conference, 1952, also recognized this danger when it declared:

Those who are ever looking backward and have accumulated much precious ecclesiastical baggage will perhaps be shown that pilgrims must travel light, and that, if we are to share at last in the great Supper, we must let go much that we treasure.¹⁶

Instead of *traditionalism*, the ecumenical movement is calling all churches to reconsider their *traditional* attitudes toward *Tradition* in the light of a careful re-examination of their own *traditions*. The important point for Methodism, at this stage, is to recognize that the triangle of authority (Scripture, tradition, and experience) is not stationary, but spinning on a central axis so as to make it impossible for us to point to any *one* of the three sides for a single answer when asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?"

¹⁵Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹⁶Report, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 11.

III. POLITY

Dr. Charles Wesley Ranson, until recently General Secretary of the International Missionary Council, tells of a conversation he had a few years ago with a very able and well-informed colleague in India, who is now a bishop in the Church of South India. When Dr. Ranson, who is an Irish Methodist, asked his friend, "What do you really think is the special contribution of Methodism to the Church of South India?" his friend paused for a moment and said: "Well, that's not an easy question. But if you want a short answer, I should say, skill in ecclesiastical organization."¹⁷

To those of us for whom Methodism has been the channel through which the Living God has spoken, in whose order we serve in the ministry of reconciliation, through whose hymns our deepest thoughts are expressed, and by whose action for "social holiness" we carry forth the demands for brotherly love in this world, it is indeed "a disquieting thought that modern Methodism is seen by some of our friends and colleagues in other great communions primarily as a piece of well-oiled and relatively smooth-running machinery."¹⁸ It is quite natural that the numerical power and financial strength of Methodism as a great worldwide communion should attract attention. But is it not our own failure as Methodists that these are too often the things which are remembered, and that the things on a deeper level are not recognized? Let us consider a case in point where Methodism today is being challenged in this regard.

At the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1876 a world organization of Methodism was first proposed. The suggestion met with hearty approval and in 1881 the first Ecumenical Methodist Conference met in London. Since that time similar meetings have been held at regular intervals, with the Ninth Conference having met at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, in September 1956.

The first six Conferences were devoted almost exclusively to fellowship and inspirational addresses, but at Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1947 the beginnings of a permanent form of organization were

¹⁷ *Proceedings of the Eighth Ecumenical Methodist Conference* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), p. 271.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

made. These were perfected at Oxford in 1951 when a Permanent Secretariat was set up, various committees were appointed, and an Executive Committee was formed under instructions to meet annually. At this time the name was changed to World Methodist Council.¹⁹

The function of the World Methodist Council is summed up in this sentence taken from its *ad interim* constitution: "to do any and all other things necessary to the promotion of World Methodism and its effectiveness as an agency of the Kingdom of God."

It is interesting to note that it was at the very same time when the ecumenical movement was taking on a permanent form of organization with the creation of the World Council of Churches, that Methodism decided to do likewise with the creation of the World Methodist Council. And although the World Methodist Council has stated that it is "far from being in rivalry with the World Council of Churches" and that its "purpose in promoting the closer unity of Methodism is that this may make a stronger contribution to the larger unity of Christ's Church throughout the world," the fact remains that Methodism has created another permanent world organization which may well prove in later years to be but another stumbling block for the ecumenical movement. Indeed, it is ironical that organized world confessionalism has developed to a large degree in consequence of the ecumenical movement.

The challenge put forth by the *Christian Century* a few years ago, protesting against the growth of "ecumenical denominationalism" which, it complained, is little more than "Internationalized Sectarianism" might be given serious consideration by Methodism before expanding the machinery of its world organization further.

Dr. Ranson speaks prophetically to Methodism when he says: We shall not recover those distinctive and ecumenically relevant notes (of Methodism) by a mere revival of antiquarianism. Still less, I believe, shall we recover them by building an impressive organization for world Methodism. We shall have to begin first

¹⁹From "The World Methodist Council in *Information Concerning the General Agencies of the Methodist Church* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, n.d.).

within our own household of faith to learn humbly and penitently what it really means to be a Church and to be a world Church. And that is done by something more fundamental and more profound than well-oiled machinery. To concentrate on organization may be the surest road to ecumenical retrogression and confessional sterility.²⁰

This is the challenge we face!

The fact is, however, that we do now have this rather impressive organization for world Methodism, and the alternative of "Either/Or" no longer exists. There is no alternative for us now but to see what we can *do* with what we *have*.

In what ways can we see this new form of institutionalism as having *positive* possibilities for Methodism *and* the ecumenical movement? Is it possible that Methodism can learn some lessons within this new form of world organization about what it means to be a church that will ultimately be of value to the larger ecumenical movement? In answer to these questions the following points suggest two ways in which the World Methodist Council may help Methodism to make positive contributions to the ecumenical movement.

1. It may provide a more adequate framework within which Methodism can realize the values of a fully horizontal ecumenical encounter. Much is to be said for the ecumenical values that can be had from the encounter of Methodists with other Methodists, for there are such great differences within Methodism itself. The fact that the separate Methodist communions are already in "full communion" with each other should be not so much a reason to overlook these differences, but rather a basis upon which they can be resolved. From this encounter Methodism may well have experiences and achievements which will be of value to the ecumenical movement as a whole.

2. It is within such an organizational framework of the whole denomination that the problems of "Doctrine" and "Authority" mentioned in this paper might best be considered by Methodism. The World Methodist Council has, in fact, already taken a step in this direction by sponsoring the first world Institute of Methodist Theological Studies which was held at Lincoln College, Oxford, during the summer of 1958. It is hoped that such study-consultations as this will not only prepare Methodists

²⁰Ranson, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

to assume a more responsible role in the ecumenical movement, but will also produce reports which, though neither definitive nor binding, would be useful for clarification and communication.

The main point is that the work of the World Methodist Council must always be seen within the context of the larger ecumenical movement, and must always be on guard against the temptations of denominational idolatry. In so far as Methodism's new strength and unity contributes to the larger unity of Christ's Church rather than to self-edification, this new step will be justifiable and laudable.

CONCLUSION

Again we ask the question, "What does this new stage of development in the ecumenical movement mean for Methodism?" Basically it means that our concepts of freedom, action, and experience must take on a new dimension. This dimension will be one of greater theological sensitivity. It carries with it an awareness that freedom of doctrine does not mean freedom from doctrine. It demands full participation in cooperative theological discussions and a willingness to absorb "the corrective impact of collective thinking."

Furthermore, it means that Methodism will bear witness, in these discussions, to the biblical and theological foundations which assert God's possession of and action in the world. This is a testimony which needs to be heard in ecumenical theological discussions, where there is a concept, all too prevalent, of religious escape from the world into a limited "unworldly" sphere of operation.

If we may use the analogy of drama, we would close this paper in the following terms: what Methodism does today, can be considered as rehearsal for its role in the great drama entitled "Christian Unity," the opening night of which is approaching. The ability to play our part well, despite the fact that it is a small part, will have a definite effect on the success of the production. The drama does not depend on us, but our performance could make the difference between the outcome of this production being proclaimed by the critics in our world audience as the one true Church of the Living God, or as only another mediocre achievement of men. Will Methodism be ready for its role? This is the challenge of the ecumenical movement.